

Les Gens du Riz (Kissi de Haute Guinée Française)

BY DENISE PAULME

(Paris: Plon, 1954.) Pp. 232. Figs., Pls.

Twelve months of investigation in two expeditions enabled the author to present this picture of a contemporary black society. A society of obscure beginnings, with neither historical past nor anthropological unity, scarcely out of convalescence but relatively prosperous, it is forming new roots, recovering from the ravages and terror caused by Samory, who had cut it off from its previous existence.

When so many populations have disintegrated after contact with the whites, it is comforting to witness this group of 140,000 individuals who are again finding a taste for life. A handicap, witchcraft, we will discuss later. A present danger is to be seen in the economic changes caused by an ever growing need for money to pay taxes and provide the dowry paid to the father of the

bride. These needs are supposed to be met by coffee and "colatier" plantations, which can only be increased at the expense of land for rice, on which subsistence is based. As a consequence, people will go into debt. Denise Paulme underlines the danger of mortgaging rice fields at an exorbitant rate of interest; the practice if unchecked would soon deprive debtors of their fields. At the same time she suggests that the system be amended without upsetting native customs. This requires tact and understanding on the part of the authorities. The peace enjoyed by the Kissi for the past sixty years must be maintained, but if several generations of administrators, familiar with the region, its language, and its inhabitants, are succeeded by newcomers without experience or experienced only in totally

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different societies, a gulf of incomprehension and hostility will soon make itself felt. Events move rapidly in Black Africa and the over-all optimistic impression of the author may already have been modified.

The title is at first misleading, since one expects rice people to be yellow. But unlike East Africa, a stock-raising region, West Africa is indeed a country of sedentary farmers, attached to the soil, utilizing all its possibilities. Agriculture, a relatively more recent development here than in the Far East, is nonetheless solidly established, even though parched fields "bristling with tree-trunks, roots, and big stones" are far removed from the familiar image brought to our minds by the word "field." Agricultural procedures, more reasonable than they seem at first, are adapted to the nature of the soil, though irrigation is unknown. The author has already pointed out¹ the dangers of plowing this thin top-soil which is better adapted to the hoe. In the fields, worked by the men, and in the gardens, worked by the women, cereal plants and vegetables alternate: cassava, corn, sweet potatoes, taros, yams, peanuts, eggplants, and tomatoes, the last, along with various sorts of peppers, used as condiments. The variety of the above list is misleading; it represents scarcely more than supplementary planting. Rice remains king, each of its ten or so varieties with a particular taste and qualities appreciated by the native consumer. A Tonkinese peasant would shudder at what is done to this rice: carefully reduced to

flour by long, tiresome pounding, it is then cooked into a sort of pudding, seasoned, fortunately, with a spicy sauce.

It is surprising to find a black society without art, almost without artisans. Denise Paulme had been attracted to the rice people by the famous stone statuettes called *kissi*; she soon learned that these are not their work. They have no masks, no wood sculptures. Iron work is rudimentary, there is no blacksmith caste. There is nothing that might be called political organization. Africa has the most varied systems, from simple family lineage to the most highly organized States. Here, each village is autonomous, turned in upon itself, far from roads, protected by its altitude and by the concealing forest. In the village, two or three family groups contain at most two hundred persons, directed by the eldest, priest of the family cult, with the aid of the other old people—gerontocracy, as is often the case in Africa. Compared to family lineage, the clan plays a minor role: exogamy and totemism are not clan but family matters. This particularism is also found in the religion.

Two attitudes in family life, which is both ordered and spontaneous, are constraint for the first-born, liberty for the younger ones. Might it not be this carefully maintained reserve toward the first that produces in the verbal exaggerations toward the others almost a bantering relationship? Simple affection is shown for the mother and the maternal side, toward whom there is no obligation. Feelings seem to be ambivalent toward the father and his side, who incarnate not only authority and

1. *Civilisations africaines* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1953), pp. 99-100.

security, but also functions and duties. Feelings vary according to the situation and the characters involved. Thanks to a sufficiently intimate acquaintance with individuals, the author is able to discriminate clearly between official rules and particular reactions. Under rather weighty constraining rules and often artificial harmony, personalities are discerned, opposing behaviors observed. Actions and words are circumspect in public, but a trained observer will be able to grasp the significant nuances.

Strange as it may seem, the woman expresses herself more freely than the man. Their relative situations, legally and in practice, do not correspond. In principle, the woman enjoys no high status. Come from outside, always feeling drawn toward the village of her birth, never completely integrated in the group, she is in return less a prisoner of the social milieu, which has not molded her from birth. This marginal situation is the mark of every patrilinear, patrilocal society. Only individual behavior varies from one such society to another; the Kissi woman shows marked independence. From this point of view, conjugal relationships are very revealing. Hatred for the husband seems almost the norm. In the case of abortion or stillbirth, the mother is automatically suspected of having wished the death of the child out of hatred for the father: "If it had lived, I could never have left my husband." Psychoanalysis has shown us identical cases in our societies, where the subconscious desire remains unspoken, unsuspected by the person involved. But among the Kissi, the woman is fully aware of it and formulates the wish to

herself, hoping thus to bring about its realization. Here we touch on the important point of cause and effect, the very basis of Kissi witchcraft; but first let us discuss their religion.

There are no deities except for one great solitary god "of impenetrable deafness"; the name Halla indicates his Moslem origin. Is this lack of a pantheon, always surprising to one more familiar with Asia, a result of the break with their own past? Did the Kissi lose their gods along with their historic memory? The author doesn't pose the question. The Kissi are not fetishists either, the word making little sense here since ancestors are their sole cult "gods." An elaborate religious system goes hand in hand with a political constitution; lacking them, the cult remains within the framework of a familial religion. This ensemble is a closed unit, formed of the dead and the living, where the supernatural retains a human appearance. For clarity's sake the author adopts a division between "ancestor and agrarian cult" and "secondary cults," but all is really determined by the dead. There is room in the cult only for them: ancestors, that is individuals who died at an advanced age, having passed through all stages of life before this supreme promotion; "special cases"—those struck by lightning or drowned, lepers, the first child lost by a couple—all these are held in reserve but never totally excluded, and turned toward in the gravest of circumstances, for example, in case of sexual lapses.² The ancestors are asked for a

2. Cf. Denise Paulme, "Fautes sexuelles et 'premiers morts,'" *Journal de Psychologie*, 1950.

good harvest, rain, children, protection against witches. They assure the smooth functioning of society: oaths and ordeals are undertaken in their name. Divination itself, a forced vocation as among the Siberian *chamans*, comes from the dead who impose the gift of second sight on creatures of their choice. The cult materializes in numerous objects emanating from the ancestor or sanctified by direct or indirect contact with him. By patient inquiry, cross-examination, and penetrating analyses the author has been able to list and classify innumerable altars and local cult-objects, along with the purposes of each. Denise Paulme sees in this proliferation a sign of vitality, but the diversity may well be more apparent than real. Each village has its favorite cults and means of defense, each selects its own sacred spots, builds its own altars. Names change, take on different meanings. All this is superficial variation on the central theme of the ancestor.

The best pages of the book are those which reveal an unexpected aspect of witchcraft, less spectacular than the usual descriptions but in reality more disturbing. Here are the devourer of souls, susceptible of animal metamorphoses, the witches' Sabbath with ritual cannibalism. But side by side with this classic type of professionals, the Kissi recognize the occasional practitioner, the intentional sorcerer, also dangerous since intention gives rise to action. The Kissi hesitate to offend susceptibilities easily aroused by a gesture or a word which might be misinterpreted, likely to launch feelings of counter-hostility. The consequences of

minor grievances are thus incalculable! Relatives, more likely than anyone else to excite anger, rancor, etc., will be the first victims. The intention remains hidden and the word unspoken is all the more powerful. Secrecy provides resentment with both its force and its greatest danger, a two-edged sword which may be turned against him who wields it, like the Tupilek Eskimo devouring his own master for want of another enemy. The intention once revealed, only an avowal can save the guilty one, the work withheld kills him who withholds it. Thence the importance of confession, nullifying the effects of thought and at the same time halting all action against the responsible party. We encounter this utilitarian notion of confession, functioning automatically as a counter-poison, in other parts of the world; the Christians, also aware of the sin of intention, attached to confession moral values originally lacking in it. Among the Kissi, thought, like the confession which suppresses it, can determine its result automatically. Will is not even a necessary condition, since an unconscious desire, an involuntary feeling, an irrepressible movement already act automatically. No one is ever innocent, no one dares boast of "a good heart," and each feels threatened because he is himself guilty. Thus the relative indulgence which absolves itself is justified: within certain limits sorcery will be tolerated. We have therefore no reason to be surprised at this acceptance: a world without sorcery would be a world without sin. But this climate of inner insecurity is a serious block to the development of a people, despite the

ability to adapt which Denise Paulme recognizes among Africans in general.³ Africa as a whole is not yet free from the great fear born of this confusion

between thought and realization which is called a characteristic of the infantile mind but of which many civilized adults carry the trace.

3. *Civilisations africaines*, p. 124.